

## How to Stand out on Your College Applications Without Taking the SATs

By Elizabeth Berry • High School July 31, 2020 at 12:00pm

Four years ago, I was in a similar spot many high school juniors and rising seniors find themselves in at this very moment. I remember the stress of picking a topic for my college essay, asking teachers to write my letters of recommendation, and studying for the SATs. While balancing these tasks the summer before my senior year of high school was difficult, I cannot imagine the pressure and uncertainties the class of 2021 is facing amidst the global pandemic. After all, junior year is the most crucial year for your college application.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, applying to colleges and universities looks a little different in 2020 than in a typical year. The most prominent change is in standardized testing, which was canceled for Spring 2020. This decision prompted many colleges to waive the SAT and/or ACT requirements. Even though testing is expected to resume in the fall, social distancing and high demand for the exams will still make testing more stressful than normal. If you are still planning to sit for the exam, the Princeton Review suggests that you continue studying for at least 30 minutes a day (and you can also follow them on social media @theprincetonreview for some free practice questions).

Many top universities across the country are considering waiving the SAT requirement altogether. These tests are only part of a student's application, but it's also known that wealthier students are more likely to exceed at these exams because they have the financial means for prep courses. This inequality gap will only widen this year since many students won't be able to risk their health to sit for the exam.

If you're applying to college this year, or to a college that has since waived standardized testing requirements, how can you stand out on your college applications in the COVID-19 era (and beyond)?

1. When soccer practice and debate team are cancelled, what do you do?

My guidance counselor's go-to question was always, "What extracurriculars are you involved in?" After all, if you're not a strong test taker (or taking the exam is out of the question), emphasizing the clubs and organizations you participate in is a good way to show a fuller picture of your interests and values. However, with sports games and other large gatherings canceled due to health risks, extracurriculars aren't as easy to add to your resume. That being said, how you engage in activities will count even more this application cycle, according to co-founder and president of Expert Admissions Bari Norman.

Think outside of the box and think local, suggests the former assistant director of admissions at Yale University Susan Chan Shifflett in an article for Inside Higher Ed. Of course, your school newspaper and drama club may meet via Zoom, but try to take on independent projects to add to your application. If you're passionate about a particular cause, create a social media account to educate your community on the topic and initiate action. Start a podcast chronicling how your town is being impacted by the virus. Reach out to local business and volunteer organizations to learn about how you can help out in a safe, socially distant way.

2. Stalk your top colleges and universities like they're your crush

Pandemic or not, it's always important to connect with the colleges you're interested in applying to — even your safety schools! Even though you may not be able to physically visit universities, there are often virtual tours of their campuses on the website. Follow the colleges on social media and engage with their content. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, many colleges are hosting virtual events that anyone can attend. Pop into one of these Zoom calls and interact with current students and professors. This will not only demonstrate your interest in the university, but also allow you to inquire about student life, and get a pulse for the campus atmosphere.

### 3. Brainstorm, write and edit your college essays as if you were a published author

My junior year English teacher told our class to “make the extraordinary, ordinary.” That was her advice for writing our Common App college essay, and I stand by her suggestion to this day. And what is more extraordinary than a pandemic? There's a lot of material out there to write about, from current events to how the pandemic has impacted you and your family. However, it's important to remain authentic and specific when writing your college essays. Although the essay portion of your application may be the most stressful component for many, it's nonetheless vital to spend time augmenting your essay to tell a story and convey who you are beyond what the reader will see on your application.

Norman explains that, similar to the importance of your extracurriculars, the college and other supplemental essays will hold extra weight this year. She tells Her Campus to “truly tailor each essay to show you mean it when you say you want to go there, and make it clear why they should pick you out of all the other qualified applicants.”

If you're struggling to come up with a thesis or response to the Common App questions, Norman recommends using your COVID-19 experience as a springboard. She advises students not to write about the pandemic for the general essay, as the Common App has even introduced an optional space on the application to separately reflect on COVID-19. This COVID-19 specific essay will allow students to explain how the emergency impacted their academic career, and responsibilities they may have taken on due to the pandemic.

Instead, she tells Her Campus, “Think about what you learned about yourself in isolation... what — or who — did you realize you really needed in your life? What did you discover about yourself? What changed? What managed to stay exactly the same? Where and how did you find joy? You can write a great essay about what you discovered about yourself during lockdown without mentioning COVID-19 at all.”

### 4. It may be summer, but education never stops!

Obviously it's important to keep your grades up during the school year, but consider enrolling in outside classes to further stand apart from other applicants. During a regular summer, some high school students sign up for college courses to count for credit. Many universities, including Yale and Harvard, are offering online courses this summer. Consider signing up for a class that interests you at one of these institutions, or a college you are hoping to apply to. This will help you establish a connection with the school and get a sense of what college classes are like, without having to visit campus in person!

You could also sign up for a MasterClass or enroll in The School of The New York Times Summer Academy program, which is now online. These are just a few ideas to consider, but do some research into other online programs you could participate in this summer to learn about a subject matter you wouldn't necessarily discuss in the classroom.

Whether you are able to sit for an SAT or ACT exam this year, there are still so many opportunities on your college application to stand out and share your story with each college and or university you apply to this fall. Take a deep breath, get to work, and remember that the Office of Admissions knows what students have been through this year. Good luck!

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